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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 002225

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SUBJECT: REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN UPDATE-NOVEMBER 21-23

REF: CARACAS 02214

CARACAS 00002225 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Pro-government and opposition university students across the country organized demonstrations in support of and against President Chavez' reform package November 21. Opposition student leaders announced that university students will not participate in the opposition's march November 26, apparently fearing violence, but called for their own march later in the week. Accion Democratica (AD) party members announced that AD voters are permitted to vote "No," contrary to its recent history of abstention, while opposition student leaders also called on their base to vote "No." The National Electoral Council (CNE) recently prohibited the distribution of campaign material by four organizations, arguing they violated CNE norms. CNE President Tibisay Lucena briefed the diplomatic community November 23 on the CNE's preparations for the December 2 referendum. Meanwhile, the TSJ declined to hear petitions on the legality of the proposed reforms. Separately, opposition-oriented cable network Globovision continues to operate under the close scrutiny of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV). END SUMMARY.

Students Still Active

12. (SBU) Pro-government students convoked a youth rally and march November 21 in favor of the "Yes" bloc. The event culminated outside of Miraflores, the presidential palace, where Chavez addressed the assembled students. The Venezuelan president called on them to vote "Yes," and warned them to be vigilant because "the imperialist oligarchy is desperate and trying to destabilize the country and lead it towards violence." Chavista student leader Cesar Trompe told the press he thought 50,000 persons participated in the day's events, including university students and students enrolled in Bolivarian educational "missions." Live television coverage of the rally did not appear to show a crowd that big, although it appeared to be the biggest Chavez youth rally in recent memory. Local media showed the large number of buses used from public university campuses to transport participants.

13. (SBU) The opposition student movement also called on its base to mobilize November 21 in commemoration of the "Day of the Student" (Reftel A). Newly-elected president of the

Federation of the Central University of Venezuela's (UCV's) Colleges, Ricardo Sanchez, publicly urged students to vote "No" in the constitutional referendum, indicating a shift in the student movement's original position to postpone it.

¶4. (SBU) Caracas-based student leaders, including Freddy Guevara, Yon Goicochea, and Sanchez, held a press conference November 22 at UCV to announce that university students will not participate in the opposition's "March of No Return" scheduled for November 26. The leaders justified their position by saying they feared for the safety of the demonstrators given the country's current political polarization. Sanchez said "we won't fall into their trap of violence," and instead announced a student march to Plaza Bolivar in downtown Caracas on November 29.

¶5. (SBU) Chavez warned against the opposition student movement's initial plans to march to Miraflores in a televised speech November 22. Chavez said "It (Miraflores) is liberated land, it belongs to the people, not to the oligarchs or to daddy's kids. (Note: Chavez has employed this last term in several speeches in an effort to tarnish the image of opposition-oriented students. End Note). In addition, Chavez said that he had already "given instructions" to Pedro Carreno, Minister of Interior and Justice, to freeze any attempt by the students to march to the presidential palace.

¶6. (SBU) Opposition-oriented students around the country also participated in the "Day of the Student" activities. Over 20,000 students participated in a march in the university town of Merida. Other street actions were reported in Aragua, Carabobo, and Anzoategui states. In many cases, the demonstrators carried banners that read "No to the Reform" and distributed informational flyers. Separately, the national press reported that between two and three Monteavila University students suffered injuries after Municipal Police

CARACAS 00002225 002.2 OF 003

(PM) officers fired rubber bullets and threw rocks at them on November 21. The students, who were assembled on the shoulder of a busy Caracas highway, were passing out flyers when they were confronted by members of the PM.

AD Gives Members Green Light To Vote

¶7. (C) Center-left political party Accion Democratica (AD) President Victor Bolivar told the media November 19 that the party is permitting AD voters to vote "No" if they want. This represents a small shift in AD's policy: in the past two national elections, AD directed its members to abstain from voting. AD even expelled some high profile members for actively supporting Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales, presidential campaign against President Chavez. AD is one of the two political parties that dominated Venezuelan politics prior to Chavez, election in 1998; however, only a very small percentage of Venezuelan voters currently identify themselves as AD members. Nevertheless, AD still maintains a nation-wide presence, including in some Chavez strongholds, and grass-roots AD support could give the "No" bloc a small boost on December 2. An Un Nuevo Tiempo party leader told us that AD is already providing a noteworthy number of polling station monitors in a number of states outside Caracas.

COPEI Proposes Debates

¶8. (SBU) Roberto Enriquez, a political leader of the center-right party COPEI, invited the "Yes" bloc to debate Chavez' proposed reforms November 23 at the National Electoral Council's (CNE's) headquarters. CNE rectors originally announced that three debates would be held before the referendum. However, representatives from the "Yes" bloc

were absent when the organizing committee in charge of the debates met, resulting in their indefinite postponement. Following Enriquez' statement, CNE rector German Yepez held a press conference to clarify that the CNE did not endorse the debates called by Enriquez. Rather, Yepez asserted that while the CNE was not opposed to the debates, they could not "force" any of the two blocs to partake in them against their will.

More Groups Oppose Reform

¶9. (SBU) The evangelical umbrella group, Evangelic Forum, issued a strong statement November 21 rejecting Chavez' proposed, constitutional reforms. It asserted that the constitution openly violates Christian values. The announcement is significant because the religious organization tends to be apolitical and many of its members are government sympathizers. Separately, the leftist Tupamaro movement in Sucre state held a press conference and announced its support for the "No" bloc. The organization's Secretary General Jesus Yepez accused the president of

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attempting to stay in power indefinitely.

CNE

¶10. (SBU) In a November 21 press conference, CNE President Tibisay Lucena announced that the CNE pulled reform-related campaign material pertaining to four groups. Lucena explained that one organization was registered with the "No" bloc and two with the "Yes" bloc. The fourth group was not registered with any side but rather called for abstention. The CNE is charged with regulating all campaign material pertaining to the referendum vote. This is not the first time it has sanctioned groups who allegedly violated CNE norms.

¶11. (C) On November 23, Lucena, flanked by CNE Rectors German Yepez and Sandra Oblitas, gave a one-hour presentation to the diplomatic community on the CNE's preparations for the December 2 referendum. Lucena expressed confidence that the CNE would be ready on Election Day at the over 11,000 voting centers. She also stressed the CNE's efforts to promote "inclusion" in recent years to increase voter registration. Asked about international observers, Lucena said the CNE has invited the presidents of its counterpart electoral organizations in the United States, Latin America, Canada,

CARACAS 00002225 003.2 OF 003

and Europe to participate. She also said as many as four domestic electoral observation NGOs would be accredited to observe the referendum. In response to another query, Oblitas insisted that the CNE has redoubled its efforts to ensure that its electoral registration rolls are valid.

The TSJ and the Reform

¶12. (SBU) In a November 22 press conference, Supreme Court (TSJ) magistrates announced that the court can only rule on the legality of the constitutional reform package if and when it is approved by referendum. They argued that the TSJ does not have the legal authority to rule on pending legislation, as is the case with the reform measures proposed by Chavez. Given their position, the TSJ also declined to hear 16 petitions to review the legality of the reforms. Judicial observation NGOs and human rights organizations have harshly criticized the TSJ for its slow response to the numerous reform-related petitions before it.

¶13. (SBU) Separately, the deans of the Political Science Departments of UCV, the Catholic University Andres Bello (UCAB), the Metropolitan University, and the University of Carabobo petitioned the Supreme Court (TSJ) November 21 to suspend the referendum and annul the reform package. The dean from UCAB argued that the reform package proposes to redefine the nature of the Venezuelan state by making it a "socialist" one. That amendment, the dean argued, could potentially exclude those Venezuelan that do not consider themselves "socialists" from certain protections and public services.

GLOBO: Tough Times Ahead

¶14. (C) Sources at all-news cable network Globovision told us November 21 that the station's management recently advised its staff to begin exploring other employment opportunities. The network reportedly paid out an early Christmas bonus to its employees and told them to "prepare for the worst" after the December 2 referendum. According to these sources, while the BRV has not sent the station official notification of possible sanctions or closure, Globovision has recently received several calls from the Telecommunications Regulatory Agency's (CONATEL), the Committee on Media Social Responsibility, and the CNE, all of which have the legal authority to reprimand the network. The local press reported that the National Network of Bolivarian Circles, the precursors to the Consejos Comunales, and the Bolivarian Press Alternative, both pro-government associations, filed a complaint with CONATEL against Globovision on November 22, accusing the network of "conspiring against the government."

DUDDY